



In Pursuit of Predators

By Ron Wilson

Predator hunter tales are as romantic as they are sobering.

Enviably accounts of having much of the countryside nearly to oneself are an appealing reminder of why we live here. But a seat in this breathtaking and nearly vacant venue is hard-earned because of the cold and snow that can make the hunting so good.

"You get those cold, clear mornings when most everyone else is at home and the world is really beautiful," said Jerry Gulke, North Dakota Game and Fish Department information technology coordinator in Bismarck. "It's always amazed me how much cold you can take if the wind is not blowing."

Left: Blending in with the environment, predator hunters will tell you, is paramount in hunting sharp-eyed prairie predators.

Below: Oftentimes, the coyote comes out on top in the hunter versus predator confrontation.

If you prepare – dress in layers, for example, to avoid sweating on the hike to your stand where clothes can be added – a prolonged cold front that stirs predators to search for food, can be your friend and not your foe.

Then again, it's not dead solid that temperatures have to be prefaced with minuses rather than pluses for the hunting to be productive.

Sarcoptic Mange

The list of animals open to hunting and trapping in North Dakota is long. Gulke's attention, however, is concentrated on just a few. He's been hunting coyotes and fox for about 25 years. "Lately, it's mostly been coyotes," he said. "Mange seemingly went through the fox population harder and you just don't see as many as you used to. You could start after deer season on the Missouri

Coteau and drift prairie and see 20-30 fox just driving around. Now if you see five or six, you're doing good."

Sarcoptic mange, a skin disease that's troubling to even look at, causes irritation of the skin, flaking, cracking and hair loss, said Dorothy Fecske, Department furbearer/disease biologist. "Loss of the insulating hair on the animals makes them vulnerable to North Dakota weather ... and many die," she said. "Mange is still prevalent in the state and seems to affect red foxes more than other species."

Mange first showed up in north central North Dakota in coyotes nearly two decades ago. The disease is caused by a mite. The female mite burrows into the skin, creating a tunnel where she deposits eggs. After the eggs hatch, the larvae move to the skin's surface and transform from nymph to adult, enabling the cycle to repeat itself.

In 2005, the percentage of coyotes with mange taken in North Dakota dropped compared to 2004, Fecske said. Mange in the fox population during the same time, however, increased slightly.

Wounded Rabbit

There are days, sitting with your outline broken by terrain and your call mimicking a rabbit in distress, that everything seems right in the predator world. All the animals circling downwind of the fuss are fully-furred and have their wits about them. "When you call fox or coyotes, you're matching wits with the intellectual of the wildlife world," Gulke said. "These animals make a living out there in country that can be pretty inhospitable at times. Many times, odds are better to be the fox or coyote rather than the hunter."

Hunters can employ mouth or electronic calls to tempt predators into range. Gulke prefers the former, as a call stuffed in his pocket or hanging from a lanyard is much



CRAIG BIRNLE

easier to carry two miles through snow and over the subtle up and down of the prairie, than heavier electronic equipment. "I just figured I could do just as well with a mouth call once I got on my game," he said.

During the breeding season in February or March, Gulke will use a howler to imitate the howling and carrying on for which coyotes are known for. The animals are highly territorial at this time and will sometimes inspect the commotion in search of interlopers. During other times of the year, his calling repertoire consists mostly of sounding like a wounded rabbit.

"No matter what animal you're calling – coyotes, elk, turkeys, whatever – it makes the

hunt that much more interesting," Gulke said. "You really get to know the animals after a while, their behavior and what it takes to get them to come in."

Even after 25 years and countless canid encounters, the game never gets old. "It still gets me fired up ... I don't think that will ever go away," Gulke said. "You would think that after all these years, calling an animal and having that encounter wouldn't get the adrenaline pumping."

The gig can be up in a hurry if you're not mindful of a few things. Like wind direction, blending into your environment, breaking up your outline with a rock pile or bush, and holding as still as possible. Make a move at the wrong time and you'll get busted. "I'm always surprised how the hunt will go because you'll get an animal coming from somewhere he shouldn't or do something he shouldn't," Gulke said. "Coyotes, I've learned, are mostly smarter than I am up to this point."

Hunters Welcome

Predator hunters, in terms of numbers, in North Dakota will likely never equal those of deer hunters or upland game hunters. Gulke guesses as to why that is. "During the primary hunting seasons people are wrapped up in ducks, pheasants and deer, and once the good predator hunting rolls

around, they're not wanting to put up with the weather, or are worn out from other pursuits," he said. "But it's certainly exciting and enjoyable, and sometimes I wonder why more people don't do it."

The veteran predator hunter sees only the benefit of playing the late season for furbearers. "Because there aren't a lot of people out and about, you're not worrying about how to work around other hunters," Gulke said. "It also occurs at a time when not much else is going on, and it beats sitting around watching football. Access to land is more open, too, as farmers and ranchers are typically not real impressed with having a bunch of coyotes around."

What Gulke looks for when hunting coyotes are areas without a lot of good roads, which eliminates traffic, making the animals a little more at ease. "I tend to gravitate toward big chunks of pasture and grasslands, places where animals are a little more relaxed about their environment," he said. If there are signs of ATVs or snowmobiles in the area, he'll take his act elsewhere entirely, as that kind of disturbance sets animals on edge.

"If I find something that looks good, I'll just take off walking," Gulke said. "And if I don't find any tracks, I'll turn and look for another spot. It's good exercise, if nothing else, and it beats sitting around."

Schooling Future Fur Harvesters

A lot is riding on a program detailed in techniques designed to harvest predators.

"The future of trapping, calling and hunting predators depends on it," said Butte's Rick Tischaefter of the Fur Harvester Education program. "We want to get people of all ages involved. Once they've been through the program, they become recruiters for the program."

The North Dakota Fur Hunters and Trappers Association, in cooperation with the State Game and Fish Department, will hold classes around the state next year on trapping, calling and other methods used to bag predators. The plan calls for program workbooks to be completed sometime this fall, followed by the certification of instructors in winter. "Students will be dealing with instructors who have the knowledge and have the in-the-field experience," Tischaefter said.

The 12- to 16-hour course will involve some classroom work, but instructors want to spend as much time outdoors actually applying some of the skills, said Tischaefter, president of the North Dakota Fur Hunters and Trappers Association. "We'll have a minimum of four courses per year in North Dakota," he said. "But hopefully the interest is such that we'll host more than that."

North Dakota fur harvesters will never outnumber, say, the state's deer hunters, but that's OK, Tischaefter said. "This is something unique and more challenging that we're trying to keep alive," he said. "We don't ever expect to take center stage, but carry on the heritage of these activities."

Rich Tischaefter, Butte, demonstrates some of the unknowns about trapping furbearers.



The Chase

Gulke will sometimes team with a partner to call predators. Marty Beard's hunting party is bigger than that.

Mary, Jeb, Holly, Pluto and Sharkey are treeing walkers and bluetick hounds. Four or five nights per week, weather permitting, Beard trails behind his charges on foot, or atop a mule after raccoons within a 100-mile radius of Bismarck. They also hunt bobcats in the badlands and mountain lions in places like Nevada and Montana.

"I used to do a lot of coyote calling and trapping, but I love to hear them dogs and watch them go," said Beard, who lives in Burleigh County. "I love to listen to the chase and see how it progresses. If I don't catch them with my dogs, I really don't have much interest."

Beard can have Mary, Jeb, Holly, Pluto and Sharkey all on the ground at once, and he can tell which dog is doing what just by the sounds they are making. "I don't really count my successes by piles of animals," he said. "I just like the chase."

In the case of raccoons, once the animal is dead, then the game is over – for good. "There are 'coons we tree night after night," Beard said. "It doesn't bother the dogs if I don't kill what they've treed. They figure it out real quick from all my praise and petting

that treeing an animal makes me happy."

But Beard doesn't walk away every time without firing a shot.

Talk to someone who has followed behind Beard in the Missouri River bottoms at night for raccoons, or in the badlands after bobcat, and they'll recommend staying home. He's relentless in his pursuit, running the uninitiated weakly into the ground. "There will be times when we'll easily cover 10 miles on foot in the badlands," he said. "As I get older, I would prefer to ride a surefooted mule, but some of that rough, rim-rocky stuff is not meant for riding."

Bobcats are the most difficult animals Beard and his dogs have chased as they leave behind the least amount of scent. Mountain lions, he said, are easy by comparison. "If you have a dog that can consistently catch a bobcat, now that is a dog," he said.

If you were a hound, Beard would be the man you'd want as your handler. There was the time Beard nearly stripped completely of his clothes in the badlands to skinny inside a hole a bobcat escaped into. Then there was the time he crawled into a cave in Montana after a mountain lion, using a video camera as a flashlight. "I didn't have a gun ... that lion was just feet away," he said.

Beard shot a big tom mountain lion in Nevada about six years ago, meeting what seems to be a personal quota. "I haven't shot one since and likely won't," he said. "I don't

mind someone else doing the shooting, it's just that I got my one and that's good enough."

North Dakota's first mountain lion season could lure Beard to the badlands if one of his contacts reports a sighting, or spots tracks. "Oh, yeah, I believe there are some mountain lions out there to hunt," he said.

Mary, Jeb, Holly, Pluto and Sharkey certainly hope so.

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CHRIS GRONDAHL

FURS SOLD TO NORTH DAKOTA FURBUYERS, 2001-2004

	Number Bought			Amount Paid			Average Price		
	2003-04	2002-03	2001-02	2003-04	2002-03	2001-02	2003-04	2002-03	2001-02
Mink	476	496	348	\$2,659.50	\$3,181.50	\$1,801.00	5.59	6.41	5.18
Muskrat	1,951	4,549	30,776	3,126.65	8,872.42	60,906.53	1.60	1.95	1.98
Red fox	1,354	973	691	22,882.00	19,148.50	11,259.25	16.90	19.68	16.29
Jackrabbit	2,084	1,399	1,504	2,487.00	1,448.75	1,537.50	1.19	1.04	1.02
Beaver	1,511	864	889	16,712.30	6,377.00	6,655.25	11.06	7.38	7.49
Raccoon	8,276	4,036	3,535	56,705.15	38,327.50	30,506.00	6.85	9.50	8.63
Coyote	10,447	5,733	2,423	254,622.29	117,555.50	37,698.50	24.37	20.50	15.56
Badger	801	505	215	12,337.50	7,129.00	2,275.50	15.40	14.12	10.58
Weasel	12	4	3	25.00	8.00	5.00	2.08	2.00	1.67
Skunk	112	221	6	662.00	1,377.50	24.00	5.91	6.23	4.00
Bobcat	24	26	12	4,062.50	4,931.00	1,770.00	169.27	189.65	147.50